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## Michael Parenti - Another View of Chomsky

33

(self.communism)

submitted 7 years ago \* by [StarTrackFan](#)

[From "Nature, Society, and Thought" Vol. 12, No. 2 (1999)]

### Another View of Chomsky

Michael Parenti

In the April 1999 Monthly Review (50, no. 11:40-47), Robert McChesney gives what amounts to an encomium to Noam Chomsky. McChesney credits the MIT professor with (a) leading the battle for democracy against neoliberalism, (b) demonstrating "the absurdity of equating capitalism with democracy" (44), and (c) being the first to expose the media's complicity with the ruling class. I would suggest that in these several areas credit for leading the way goes to the generations of Marxist writers and other progressive thinkers who fought the good fight well before Chomsky made his substantial and much appreciated contributions.

More important is the question of Chomsky's politics. McChesney says that Chomsky can be "characterized as an anarchist or, perhaps more accurately, a libertarian socialist" (43). "Libertarian socialist" is a sweeping designation, safely covering both sides of the street. Of course, the ambiguity is not McChesney's but Chomsky's. As far as I know, Chomsky has never offered a clear explication of his anarcho-libertarian- socialist ideology. That is to say, he has never explained to us how it would manifest itself in organized political struggle or actual social construction. McChesney says that Noam Chomsky has been a persistent "opponent and critic of Communist and

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Leninist political states and parties” (43). I would add that, as a “critic,” Chomsky has yet to offer a systematic critique of existing Communist parties and states. (Not that many others have.) Here is a sampling of Chomsky’s views on Communism and Leninism:

In an interview in *Perception* (March/April 1996), Chomsky tells us: “The rise of corporations was in fact a manifestation of the same phenomena that led to Fascism and Bolshevism, which sprang out of the same totalitarian soil.” Like Orwell and most bourgeois opinion makers and academics, Chomsky treats Communism and fascism as totalitarian twins, offering no class analysis of either, except to assert that they are both rooted in some unspecified way to today’s corporate domination.

In *Z Magazine* (October 1995), four years after the Soviet Union had been overthrown, Chomsky warns us of “left intellectuals” who try to “rise to power on the backs of mass popular movements” and “then beat the people into submission.... You start off as basically a Leninist who is going to be part of the Red bureaucracy. You see later that power doesn’t lie that way, and you very quickly become an ideologist of the Right.... We’re seeing it right now in the Soviet Union [sic]. The same guys who were communist thugs two years back, are now running banks and [are] enthusiastic free marketeers and praising America.”

In its choice of words and ahistorical crudity, this statement is rather breathtaking. The Leninist “communist thugs” did not “very quickly” switch to the right after rising to power. For more than seventy years, they struggled in the face of momentous Western capitalist and Nazi onslaughts to keep the Soviet system alive. To be sure, in the USSR’s waning days, many like Boris Yeltsin crossed over to capitalism’s ranks, but other Reds continued to resist free-market incursions at great cost to themselves, many meeting their deaths during Yeltsin’s violent repression of the Russian parliament in 1993.

In the same *Perception* interview cited above, Chomsky offers another embarrassingly ill-informed comment about Leninism: “Western and also Third World intellectuals were attracted to the Bolshevik counterrevolution [sic] because Leninism is, after all, a doctrine that says that the radical

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intelligentsia have a right to take state power and to run their countries by force, and that is an idea which is rather appealing to intellectuals.” Here Chomsky fashions a cartoon image of ruthless intellectuals to go along with his cartoon image of ruthless Leninists. They do not want the power to end hunger, they merely hunger for power.

In his book *Powers and Prospects* (1996, 83), Chomsky begins to sound like Ronald Reagan when he announces that Communism “was a monstrosity,” and “the collapse of tyranny” in Eastern Europe and Russia is “an occasion for rejoicing for anyone who values freedom and human dignity.” Tell that to the hungry pensioners and child prostitutes in Gorky Park. I treasure freedom and human dignity as much as anyone, yet I find no occasion for rejoicing. The post-Communist societies do not represent a net gain for such values. If anything, what we are witnessing is a colossal victory for gangster capitalism in the former Soviet Union, the strengthening of the most retrograde forms of global capitalism and economic inequality around the world, a heartless and unrestrained increase in imperialistic aggression, and a serious setback for revolutionary liberation struggles everywhere.

We should keep in mind that Chomsky’s political underdevelopment is shared by many on the left whose critical views of “corporate America” represent their full ideological grasp of the political world. Be he an anarcho-libertarian or libertarian- socialist or anarcho-syndicalist-socialist or just an anarchist, Chomsky appeals to many of the young and not so young. For he can evade all the hard questions about organized struggle, the search for a revolutionary path, the need to develop and sustain a mass resistance, the necessity of developing armed socialist state power that can defend itself against the capitalist counterrevolutionary onslaught, and all the attendant problems, abuses, mistakes, victories, defeats, and crimes of Communist revolutionary countries and their allies.

What we used to say about the Trotskyites can apply to the Chomskyites: they support every revolution except those that succeed. (Cuba might be the exception. Chomsky usually leaves that country unmentioned in his sideswipes at existing

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or once- existing Communist countries.) Most often, organized working- class struggles and vanguard parties are written off by many on the left (including Chomsky) as “Stalinist,” a favorite, obsessional pejorative made all the more useful by remaining forever undefined; or “Leninist,” which is Chomsky’s code word for Communist governments and movements that have actually gained state power and fought against the west to stay in power. Through all this label-slinging, no recognition is given to the horrendous battering such countries and movements endure from the Western imperialists. No thought is given to the enormously distorting impact of capitalist counterrevolutionary power upon the development of existing and once-existing Communist governments, nor the evils of international capitalism that the Communists and their allies were able to hold back, evils that are becoming more and more apparent to us today.

Bereft of a dialectical grasp of class power and class struggle, Chomsky and others have no critical defense against the ideological anti-Communism that inundates the Western world, especially the United States. This is why, when talking about the corporations, Chomsky can sound as good as Ralph Nader, and when talking about existing Communist movements and society, he can sound as bad as any right-wing pundit. In sum, I cannot join McChesney in heaping unqualified praise upon Noam Chomsky’s views. When Chomsky departs from his well-paved road of anticorporate exposé and holds forth on Communism and Leninism, he shoots from the hip with disappointingly facile and sometimes incomprehensible pronunciamentos. We should expect something better from our “leading icon of the Left.”

*Berkeley, California*

*Michael Parenti’s most recent books are Dirty Truths, Blackshirts and Reds, and America Besieged, all published by City Lights, San Francisco*

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[\[-\] StarTrackFan \[S\]](#) 13 points 7 years ago

Another great, and longer, article by Parenti examining the problem Chomsky typifies is his "[Left Anticommunism: The Unkindest Cut](#)"

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[\[-\] memographer110](#) 13 points 7 years ago

Yeah, I really like Chomsky for the stuff outlined in the first part of this passage, but as for the rest... what the hell, hombre. You'd think a guy who wrote a book about propagandist US media wouldn't turn around and endorse the fucking Robert Conquest narrative of the CCCP. I'm not a total apologist, I think everyone in this subreddit would agree that the CCCP suffered from some serious flaws, but many of them look totally inevitable in historical hindsight. At the very least, lumping Soviet and Chinese Communism together with Fascism is totally absurd. Ugh.

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It's basic America-Centrism: Chomsky is one of the most known American leftist intellectuals, so way too many Americans cling to him and do not learn more than what Chomsky has to offer.

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I once questioned why Chomsky receives so much attention for what is, at best, a repetition of the same "left" concepts we've been hearing and reading since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century on [/r/socialism](#). I was

obviously not well received. Wish I would have had this article handy then. Thanks for sharing, comrade!

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Fantastic. Parenti. Yes! Very useful...thanks OP

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Chomsky warns us of “left intellectuals” who try to “rise to power on the backs of mass popular movements” and “then beat the people into submission.

Literally an agent of the bourgeoisie in the working class movement.

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